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A Bookkeeping Win For Arms Sales Foes

Jimmy Carter didn't want to do it, but he finally agreed to let the sale of seven AWACS planes to the shah of Iran go down in the books for 1978.

That may sound like a tedious billing detail, but to Capitol Hill critics of the \$1.2 billion exception to President Carter's new arms sale policy, it is a considerable victory — and one which makes it much likelier that next year Carter will practice what he preaches about cutting back on arms sales.

The reasons he insisted on letting the shah, one of the world's most compulsive hardware collectors, have the sophisticated AWACS (for airborne warning and control system) are not entirely clear. The State Department denies it is because Gerald Ford had promised them. Defense swears it is not to bring down the unit cost of the plane, (which in any case, is strictly forbidden under the new Carter canon) or to soothe the Air Force for NATO's rejection of the new plane.

IN THE END, administration lobbyists fell back on Old Faithful, the "national security" argument. And the shah, whatever his record on human rights, has always been "a most helpful ally."

Carter was taken aback by his defeat at the hands of Sen. John Culver, D-Iowa, who, with his bare hands, rolled back the votes for the sale in a memorable July meeting of the House International Relations Committee.

Culver, a forceful advocate of cutting down on "heroin-pushing," as he calls America's arms merchandising, was much assisted by CIA Director Stansfield Turner's expression of alarm about the danger of the plane falling into Soviet hands. This mobilized conservatives, who otherwise have nothing against arms sales.

Liberals were already appalled by a deal that contravened the cardinal points of the stated Carter policy — reduced volume, a ban on introducing new weapons into a world neighborhood and other promises which indicated anything but an "absolute continu-

AFTER THIS SETBACK, Carter regrouped. He sent Gen. Howard Fish to Tehran to soothe the shah, got Adm. Turner to write another letter saying his objections had been overcome by some technical changes, ordered high State Department officials to get cracking with calls and visits to the Hill, and himself took to the phone to tell House International Relations Committee members that the AWACS' secrets would be safe with the shah.

One of those he called was Rep. Gerry Studds, D-Mass., a leader in the fight to ground the sale. He assured Studds that he should have no fears about the security of the AWACS.

"It's not the security I worry about," Studds told the President politely, "it's the policy."

On Sept. 6, the President resubmitted the sale to Congress. It would become effective if both chambers failed to register disapproval within 30 days.

To the surprise of the administration, nothing happened. They began asking, "Where is Culver? Where is Studds?"

HOUSE INTERNATIONAL Relations Committee Chairman Clement Zablocki, D-Wis., who ordinarily looks upon any submission from Studds as a cross he must bear, asked him pointedly several times, "Don't you have anything for me?"

Culver and Studds were playing a waiting game. They knew the administration had rounded up the votes for the sale. But if they lost the policy war, they at least wanted to win the bookkeeping battle. They wanted to delay the disapproval resolution as long as possible so that Carter could not put the \$1.2 billion on his 1977 total, and thus have a higher figure as a standard when he got down to making good on his pledge to make substantial reductions in fiscal year 1978.

Culver and Studds wanted to hold off until after Oct. 1, when fiscal year 1978 officially begins. With the shah's \$1.2 billion buy on the books, he would, next year, be operating on a much narrower margin. And, in due course, when some country lusting for tanks or missile launchers came forward, he might have to say, "Sorry, I'm over my budget."

NINE BILLION, six hundred thousand dollars in arms sales were rung up in the year 1977.

Carter insisted he had the right to charge the sale to 1977, but Culver and Studds, hanging tough, countered that the resubmitted sale constituted a new project and that the clock began running on Sept. 6, giving them one month for their disapproval resolutions.

The President, according to one partisan, "simply wanted to start the new year fresh, with the books cleared of everything that was pending, promised or even hinted at by the peddlers — from there on it's going to be cut, cut, cut."

The Congress people say they are just making it easier for Carter to begin doing what he says he wants to do. During the campaign, he declared that we should be the world's granary, not its armory.

The battle of wills went on for several weeks. In the end, Carter was persuaded that he had to do something for the anti-arms sales group because he would need them on other things.

Culver said he was "quite pleased."